

Mrs. Brown of Falkland's Robin Hood Ballads and their Critical Reception

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Abstract: The earliest ballads of Robin Hood such as *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c.1450) and *Robin Hood and the Potter* (c.1450) give no clue as to the manner of Robin Hood's birth. This was still the case when Joseph Ritson published his influential ballad anthology entitled *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795). Five years after Ritson, however, Robert Jamieson published *Popular Ballads and Songs, from Tradition, Manuscripts, and Scarce Editions* (1806). In that collection two new never-before-seen Robin Hood ballads appeared entitled *The Birth of Robin Hood* and *The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John*. Jamieson had transcribed the ballads from Anna Gordon Brown of Falkland, Scotland. Although twentieth-century Robin Hood critics have derided Mrs. Brown's ballads as being of little merit compared to earlier material, Mrs. Brown enjoyed a 'literary afterlife' in the tradition as Goody – the old woman who recites Robin Hood stories to dinner guests – in the first ever Robin Hood novel entitled *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* (1819). Late-Victorian and Edwardian children's books would also incorporate Brown's origin stories into their plots, as can be seen in Paul Creswick's *Robin Hood and his Adventures* (1917). Thus it is time that Brown's literary afterlife and influence were examined. The proposed paper, therefore, is intended to fit into the panel 'Women Collectors and Collected Women'.

Introduction

Throughout history Scottish authors have shaped the legend of Robin Hood. For example, it is in medieval and early modern Scottish chronicles written by Andrew of Wyntoun, John Major, and Walter Bower that Robin is first established as a 'historic' figure, and not solely a man who exists in ballads. During the nineteenth century, the first two Scottish novels, *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, both of which were published in 1819, were written by Scottish authors and first published in Edinburgh.¹ There is not a single scholar who would question the appearance of the works of Wyntoun, Bower, Major, or Scott within the Robin Hood canon – that is to say, those texts which scholars have agreed are an undeniable part of the Robin Hood tradition. Yet as this paper illustrates, there has been a certain amount of hesitancy on the part of modern critics to include within the tradition three Robin Hood ballads

¹ Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form and Reception in the Outlaw Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp.36-54.

which first appeared when Robert Jamieson noted them down from the celebrated Mrs. Brown of Falkland (1747-1810).

To begin with, it is necessary to provide a very brief history of Robin Hood scholarship during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There was a significant degree of interest in the medieval English past during the mid-to-late eighteenth century, and much of this amateur scholarship focused upon medieval and early-modern ballads, especially those relating to historic worthies such as King Arthur and Robin Hood.² The famous outlaw was a staple of antiquaries' publishing efforts during the eighteenth century. He appeared in Thomas Percy's three volume *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, and in the four volume work *Old Ballads, Historical and Narrative* published by the Welsh bookseller and antiquary in 1784. The most famous eighteenth-century Robin Hood scholar, however, was Joseph Ritson (1752-1803). His two volume work *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* was, upon its first publication in 1795, the *definitive* collection of Robin Hood texts. Ritson made available in two small and easily accessible volumes texts such as the fifteenth-century poems *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, *Robin Hood and the Monk*, and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*. In his collection Ritson also included the texts of seventeenth-century broadside ballads such as *Robin Hood and the Tanner*, and *Robin Hood's Progress to Nottingham*.

None of the ballads in Ritson's collection, however, provided the story of Robin Hood's birth. It was not until Jamieson published a collection of ballads entitled *Popular Ballads and Songs, from Tradition, Manuscripts, and Scarce Editions* in 1806 did an account of Robin's birth appear in a ballad entitled *The Birth of Robin Hood*. Another never before seen ballad relating to Robin's life entitled *The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John* also appeared in the same collection. Walter Scott in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* published in 1802 included another of Mrs. Brown's Robin Hood ballads entitled *Rose the Red, and White Lily*. Jamieson and Scott

² See Monica Santini, *The Impetus of Amateur Scholarship: Discussing and Editing. Medieval Romances in Late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

transcribed these ballads from Mrs. Brown. Usually the only woman associated with the Robin Hood legend is Maid Marian, and the only writers who have represented her have usually been men. Thus a conference which focuses upon women's history is the perfect opportunity to discuss these ballads and explore what I shall call the 'literary afterlife' and subtle influence of Mrs. Brown upon later manifestations of the Robin Hood tradition – a woman whose contributions to the legend, if she is remembered at all, have often been dismissed by late-nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars.

Mrs. Brown's Ballads and their Critical Reception

Anna Gordon was born in Aberdeen in 1747, the daughter of Thomas Gordon, a Professor of Humanities, and Lilius Forbes. She grew up in a Scotland in which ballads and folk songs were central to both elite and popular culture, as Ruth Perry comments that 'people of all ranks played and sang and whistled it. There was (and is) an enormous repertoire of traditional music both in the form of songs and tunes, the bulk of the latter usually composed for fiddle and for the pipes.'³ The most significant ballad which was transcribed from Mrs. Brown of Falkland was the one that is now known as *The Birth of Robin Hood*.⁴ The story follows the daughter of Earl Richard who falls in love with a servant named Willie – a union of which she knows her father the Earl would disapprove. The Earl's daughter and Willie often have secretive meetings in the forest, and it is soon revealed that she is pregnant. The Earl's daughter escapes from her home to go and give birth in the forest. Realising that his daughter is missing, the Earl convenes a search party and goes out after her. He finds his daughter in the wood, exhausted from having

³ Ruth Perry, 'The Famous Ballads of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown' in *A Cultural History of Women in the Age of Enlightenment* ed. by Ellen Pollack 6 Vols. (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2012) 4: 2 [Internet <<https://lit.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/Famous-Ballads.pdf>> Accessed 27 July 2016].

⁴ For a critical edition, see Anna Gordon Brown, 'The Birth of Robin Hood' in *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* ed. by R. B. Dobson & J. Taylor 3rd Edn. (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), pp.195-197.

given birth and, despite the circumstances of the illegitimate birth the Earl is overcome with happiness upon seeing the child:

He kist him o'er and o'er again:
'My grandson I thee claim;
And Robin Hood in the gude green wood,
And that shall be your name.'⁵

While *The Birth of Robin Hood* has at least made into Barrie Dobson and John Taylor's critical anthology of Robin Hood ballads *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (1976), Brown's second Robin Hood ballad entitled *The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John* did not, and has received very little critical attention. This ballad relates the story of two young women who one day decide to dress in men's clothes and travel into the greenwood under the assumed names of Nicholas and Roger Roun. The two women are found sleeping in the wood by Robin Hood and Little John, and eventually one of the women, Roger, becomes pregnant:

"When we were in our father's ha',
We wore the beaten gold;
But now we wear the shield so sharp,
Alas! We'll die with cold!"
Then up bespake him Robin Hood,
As he to them drew near;
"Instead of boys to carry the bow,
Two ladies we've got here."
So they had not been in gud green-wood,
A twalmonth and a day,
Til Roger Roun was as big wi' bairn
As ony ladie could gae.⁶

During the early nineteenth century when the ballads first appeared, there appears to have been little question over whether the ballads should be included as part of the developing canon. Ritson's original text was reprinted in 1820,⁷ 1823,⁸ 1832,⁹ and then revised and

⁵ Brown, 'The Birth of Robin Hood', p.197.

⁶ Anna Gordon Brown, 'The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John' in *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hood* ed. by J. M. Gutch (2 Vols. London: Longman, 1847), 2: 391.

⁷ *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* ed. by Joseph Ritson (London: T. Egerton, 1795; repr. London: Longman, 1820).

expanded in 1865.¹⁰ Brown's ballads appeared in both the 1832 and the 1865 edition of Ritson's expanded and revised work. Furthermore, the antiquary John Mathew Gutch included Brown's ballads in his critical anthology *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode* published in 1847. Gutch justified the inclusion of Brown's *The Birth of Robin Hood* by writing that 'it is certainly characteristic, and perfectly consistent with his subsequent life and conduct; insomuch, that it cannot be said of the renowned hero of Sherwood, as Deianira says of Hercules, - "Dissimiles hic vir et ille puer"'.¹¹ And of *Rose the Red, and White Lily* and *The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John* he says that 'there can be no doubt that the three following ballads relate to Robin Hood and Little John and have their origin in the same tradition'.¹²

However, the attitude towards these ballads changed as the nineteenth century progressed. A further edition of Ritson's work appeared in 1884 which did not include Brown's ballads.¹³ Between 1882 and 1898 Francis J. Child published the multivolume *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. His third volume was devoted almost entirely to Robin Hood ballads. Yet Brown's ballads were not to be included alongside other canonical Robin Hood texts but were placed in the second volume which dealt with songs of Scottish origin. The main reason that he gave for placing Brown's ballads outside of the Robin Hood canon was that many of

⁸ *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* ed. by Joseph Ritson (2 Vols. London: T. Egerton, 1795; repr. London: C. Stocking, 1823).

⁹ *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* ed. by Joseph Ritson (2 Vols. London: T. Egerton, 1795; repr. 2 Vols. London: William Pickering, 1832).

¹⁰ *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* ed. by Joseph Ritson (2 Vols. London: T. Egerton, 1795; repr. London: Bell and Daldy, 1865).

¹¹ *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode* ed. by J. M. Gutch, 2: 373; the translation of the Latin reads 'how different from the present man was the youth of earlier days'.

¹² *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*, ed. by J. M. Gutch, 2: 377.

¹³ *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* ed. by Joseph Ritson (2 Vols. London: T. Egerton, 1795; repr. [n.p.]: [n.pub.], [n.d.]).

them bear resemblance to other popular Scottish ballads: all of Brown's songs were said to be variants upon the popular Scottish ballad *Willie O' Douglas Dale*.¹⁴

He justified excluding *Rose the Red, the White and Lily* and *The Wedding of Robin Hood and Little John* from the Robin Hood tradition because:

Robin Hood has no love-story in any ancient ballad, though his name has been foisted into modern love ballads, as in "Robin Hood and the Tanner's Daughter" [...] Maid Marian is a late accretion. There is a piteously vulgar broadside, in which Maid Marian, being parted from Robin, dresses herself "like a page" (but armed fully), meets Robin Hood, also under disguise, and has an hours fight with him.¹⁵

When discussing *The Birth of Robin Hood* Child made a break with established scholarly practice and renamed the ballad as *Willie and Earl Richard's Daughter*. To justify this he stated that 'this ballad certainly does not belong to the cycle of Robin Hood, and for this reason the title hitherto held by it could not be retained [...the title of] the Earl of Huntingdon has no place in the ancient traditional ballads of Robin Hood, but is of later literary invention'.¹⁶ Child was correct, of course, for Robin was not named as the Earl of Huntingdon until Anthony Munday's two plays *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington* written between 1597 and 1598.

Taken at face value, Child's justifications for excluding these ballads appear to be relatively sound. What is perplexing, however, is that despite the objections listed above Child includes as part of the Robin Hood canon certain ballads at which his afore-mentioned objections could also be raised. For example, most of the later seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads such as *Robin Hood and the Tanner* and *Robin Hood and the Scotchman* are merely variations upon the theme of *The Jolly Pinder of Wakefield*.¹⁷ Although very few ballads reveal

¹⁴ *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Francis J. Child (5 Vols. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1882-1898; repr. 5 Vols. New York: Dover, 2005), 2: 406.

¹⁵ Child, 2: 417.

¹⁶ Child, 2: 412.

¹⁷ Child, 3: 130.

that Robin has a love interest such as *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, and *Robin Hood's Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage* which sees Robin Hood marry Clorinda, the Queen of the Shepherdesses, Child has no compunction about including these in the tradition. Child also includes Martin Parker's *A True Tale of Robin Hood* originally published in 1632.¹⁸ This ballad names Robin as the Earl of Huntingdon, yet is included despite his remarks that any ballad stating that Robin was a nobleman was of dubious canonicity.

Conclusion

The reasons why Child applied these double standards to these ballads will likely have died with Child himself. As stated in the introduction, Child's view has largely persisted into modern scholarship. Barrie Dobson and John Taylor, two noted Robin Hood scholars, said in *Rymes of Robyn Hood* that 'Mrs. Brown's ballad owes nothing but Robin Hood's name to the native English cycle of stories' while they even went so far as to suggest that Brown simply invented the stories, saying that 'it remains suspicious that for the missing story of [Robin Hood's] birth we have to wait until the recitation of a remarkable Scottish woman delivered five years after the first (1795) edition of Ritson's comprehensive collection'.¹⁹ Such a suggestion contradicts David C. Fowler's earlier argument that Mrs. Brown's ballads were learned from her mother, aunt, and her maidservant.²⁰ Moreover, Mrs. Brown's ballads appear nowhere in the even more recent ballad anthology by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren entitled *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (2000).²¹ But the exclusion of Brown's ballads from the overall tradition, especially in the face of the double standards applied to their 'authenticity' when compared to other Robin Hood

¹⁸ Child, 3: 227-233.

¹⁹ Dobson Taylor, p.195.

²⁰ Suzanne Gilbert, 'Orality and the Ballad Tradition' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women's Writing* ed. by Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 35-43 (pp.39-40).

²¹ *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. by Stephen Knight & Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

tales, should encourage a rethink of what scholars mean by 'canon' when discussing legends such as Robin Hood. Several canonical works from the nineteenth century do feature Mrs. Brown and her ballads. She enjoys a 'literary afterlife' as the old village woman Goody in the framing narrative of the first Robin Hood novel entitled *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* published in 1819. The novel begins in the nineteenth-century lawyer's home in Oxfordshire where he is holding a dinner party, and the subject turns to ancient songs and ballads. The lawyer reveals that there is a woman named Goody living in the village who is descended from Welsh bards and knows by heart several tales of Robin Hood. On the next evening the whole village descends on Goody's cottage to hear a tale of Robin Hood and his merry men.²² Stephen Knight, who has studied this novel in depth, agrees that Goody is modelled upon Mrs. Brown.²³

Robert Southey in his unfinished poem entitled *Robin Hood: A Fragment* which was published in 1847 utilises the plot of *The Birth of Robin Hood*. Earl William – a name obviously taken from Brown's ballad – and his lover Emma are now respectably married:

O! Emma! fairest, loveliest of thy sex!
[...]
For sure, if ever on a marriage day
Approving angels smiled
Upon their happy charge,
'Twas when her willing hand
Was to Lord William given.
The noble to the noble -- blooming youth
To manhood in its comeliness and prime:
Beauty to manliness and worth to worth;
The gentle to the brave --
The generous to the good.²⁴

In fact, Southey expanded and continued the plot of Brown's ballad, which sees Robin's mother die and Earl William descend into depression. Thus the situation is this: works which are considered to be canonical have taken some of their inspiration from a supposedly non-

²² Anon. *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* 2 Vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1819), 1: 54-78.

²³ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form, and Reception*, p.146-147.

²⁴ Robert Southey, *Robin Hood: A Fragment* (London: William Blackwood, 1847), pp.1-2.

canonical work, and in view of this, perhaps it is time to reconsider the status of Mrs. Brown's ballads within the Robin Hood tradition.